

In Flanders Fields

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Story Line:

This play is about John McCrae and the writing of his memorable poem *In Flanders Fields*, which he wrote in the spring of 1915, while serving as a medical surgeon with Canadian soldiers fighting in Ypres in Belgium. The Germans were using Chlorine gas against Canadian soldiers.

He wrote his memorable poem after one of his friends, Alexis Helmer, died on the battlefield. McCrae had written and published poems previously. In writing *In Flanders Fields* McCrae sat beside the grave of his friend Helmer, then crumpled up the poem and threw it away. It was picked up by someone who knew him and he was later encouraged to publish the poem, which appeared in Punch Magazine in London later in 1915.

In Flanders Fields became the iconic poem of the era. The Red Poppy became the icon symbol of Remembrance, and Remembrance Day (November 11th)

McCrae, who suffered from chronic asthma, died of pneumonia in January 1918. He had served as a Canadian surgeon on the Western Front for nearly the entire four years of the First World War.

A few days before he died he appointed Chief Surgeon of the British Army, the only time a Canadian has ever held such an honour.

Characters:

John McCrae – Surgeon and poet

Alexis Hemler – friend of McCrae

Divisional Padre

A Canadian Nurse

A Canadian Sergeant

A Canadian Corporal

Several Young Soldiers

A Medical Medic

Stretcher bearers

ACT One

Scene One Canadian Trench May 1915 NIGHT

[Several Canadian soldiers crouch within a trench. They are ready to go over the top in a night raid of the German trenches. A Sergeant is in charge.]

SERGEANT

Stand by. Two minutes.

CORPORAL

Stay behind me and do what I do.

YOUNG SOLDIER

I am scared.

CORPORAL

We all are.

SERGEANT

No talking in the ranks.

[whisper]

YOUNG SOLDIER

Promise me something.

HELMER

Anything.

YOUNG SOLDIER

If I buy it ... don't leave me behind.

HELMER

You'll be fine.

YOUNG SOLDIER

Please promise me you won't leave me to the rats!

HELMER

I promise.

SERGEANT

It's time. Good luck boys.

CORPORAL

Move slowly and don't make a sound.

HELMER

Yes ... corporal.

[the corporal leads the way, the young soldier comes second and Helmer comes third. They quietly go over the top on a foray into 'no-man's land.']

[the field telephone rings.]

SERGEANT

Blast!

[he quickly grabs it and holds it to his mouth.]

SERGEANT

Yes sir, they are away ... please let me call you back when they return ... it's just that ... sir please listen. When the telephone rings they can hear it clear across in the hun's lines ...

[he sets down the field telephone and crawls to the top of the trench and looks out into the night with binoculars.]

[In a few seconds a flare lights up the sky. The flare comes from the hun side.]

SERGEANT

Damn ... they'll spot them for sure!

[Then there is a clack, clack clack of a machine gun. Then the flare goes out and there is silence.]

[HELMER reappears dragging the lifeless body of the young soldier. He tumbles back into the trench.]

SERGEANT

Where's the corporal?

HELMER

He's bought it.

[Helmer sets the young soldier carefully down on the ground.]

SERGEANT

Are you sure?

HELMER

The machine gun took his head right off his shoulders. That's his brains all over my uniform.

[The sergeant shakes the young soldier's shoulder. There's a groan.]

SERGEANT

At least he is still alive.

HELMER

The corporal pushed him out of the way of the bullets.

SERGEANT

Get the medic and some stretcher bearers.

[A medic and two stretcher bearers appear and tend to the young soldier.]

SERGEANT

How far did you get?

HELMER

Fifteen maybe twenty yards. The wire is still intact.

[A shell explodes nearby. They duck.]

SERGEANT

What do you have to report?

HELMER

The hun are up to something.

SERGEANT

They are always up to something. What did you observe?

HELMER

We heard and saw many men hard at work moving what sounded like beer kegs.

SERGEANT

Beer kegs ... you're daft.

HELMER

Whatever they were ... they are long, heavy and made of steel.

SERGEANT

Are you sure?

[The Sergeant notices a hole in Helmer's uniform.]

SERGEANT

You better go to the hospital as well.

HELMER

It's just a flesh wound.

SERGEANT

Let the doctor look at it. It might get infected.

HELMER

I'll be fine.

SERGEANT

The hun piss on their ammunition before firing it at us.

HELMER

You're making this up sarge.

SERGEANT

The hell I am. You wouldn't be much of a soldier with just one arm!

HELMER

I guess not. Sorry about leaving the corporal behind.

SERGEANT

All we can do is look after the living.

HELMER

He was a good man.

[Another shell falls nearby with a thunderous clap. They duck. Ground falls all around them.]

HELMER

That was close!

SERGEANT

Indeed he was. I will need you to take the corporal's place.

HELMER

Me a corporal?

SERGEANT

Yup!

[The stretcher bearers lift the young soldier.]

SERGEANT

Medic take this soldier back with you as well. Make sure the doc looks at him.

HELMER

Thanks sarge.

SERGEANT

I won't expect you back until tomorrow mid day at the earliest.

[The stretcher bearers bound off with their stretcher. Helmer follows them.]

[The sergeant takes a piece of paper and tears it into small pieces. Then he tosses them up and they flutter back down to the ground.]

[The sergeant lifts the field telephone and cranks it then he speaks into it.]

SERGEANT

They're back ... the corporal bought it, a second casualty. I sent the third back. He had a flesh wound.

[he listens for a moment then speaks again.]

SERGEANT

They report cylinders at the front line. We should expect a gas attack in the morning ... there is no wind here at the present time.

[he listens for another moment then speaks again.]

SERGEANT

Yes sir. That should stir things up a bit.

[The sergeant sets down the phone. He crawls to the top of the trench and looks across no man's land with his binoculars.]

[In a few seconds there is the sound of shells from the allied side passing over head and falling on the German lines. The sergeant looks up into the sky at the imaginary shells passing over]

[There are flashes at the distant and distant screams.

SERGEANT

Take that you bastards.

[fade out.]

[End of Scene]

Scene Two Medical Aid Station behind Canadian Lines NIGHT

[There is the flash and thunder of artillery in the distance.]

[The medic and stretcher bearers arrive at the medical aid station. It is a large tent with a red cross on its roof. Then Helmer walks up to the station, with his rifle over his shoulder, but stands off to the side as the stretcher bearers do their job..]

[The medic enters the tent.]

[The medic leaves the tent and a doctor wearing a white surgeon's coat and doctor's hat and a mask appears. He is covered in blood. The medic walks him over to the stretcher. He kneels, takes his pulse, lowers his mask and takes a look at the wound on the young soldier on the stretcher.]

MCCRAE

Good, you have stemmed the bleeding. Take him right in. Keep pressure on the wound and give him a pint of plasma. We will operate when he has stabilized.

[The medic presses firmly down on the pressure bandage. The stretcher bearers lift the young soldier. The medic holds open the tent flap and in they all go.]

[McCrae stands up and lets out a deep sigh. He looks up at the stars.]

MCCRAE

Will this nightmare never end?

[Helmer sets down his rifle. Then McCrae notices he is not alone and turns to Helmer.]

MCCRAE

Sorry, I didn't see you there. Are you hurt?

HELMER

A bullet grazed me.

MCCRAE

Show me.

[Helmer unbuttons his uniform and shows the doctor.]

MCCRAE

I will take a look at you first. Sit here.

[Helmer sits on a wooden crate near the tent flap. McCrae opens the tent flap and calls in.]

MCCRAE

A wash basin, a towel and dressing pack.

[He lets the tent flap drop.]

MCCRAE

It's a beautiful spring night.

HELMER

Indeed it is.

MCCRAE

The stars are out.

HELMER

Indeed they are ... What about my friend.

[Helmer points to the tent.]

MCCRAE

You came with him?

HELMER

Yes, I came back from the line with the soldier that was just brought in. We were out on a night patrol in no man's land. Our corporal bought it.

MCCRAE

Your friend has lost a great deal of blood. We'll give him some blood plasma and let his stabilize a bit before we operate.

HELMER

Will he live?

MCCRAE

Yes ...I think he will. The wound is clean ... it looks like the bullet went straight through.

[the medic returns with a wash basin and towel and dress. McCrae starts to tend to Helmer.]

MCCRAE

What's your name son?

HELMER

Helmer ... Alexis Helmer.

MCCRAE

Where you from?

HELMER

Edmonton.

MCCRAE

You're a long way from home.

HELMER

So are you sir.

[Helmer extends his hand and McCrae and him shake.]

MCCRAE

I am Lt. Colonel John McCrae. Divisional surgeon.

HELMER

Where are you from sir?

MCCRAE

Montreal ... and ditch the sir ... son.

HELMER

Yes Colonel.

MCCRAE

Call me John.

HELMER

Been here long?

MCCRAE

Since the beginning! You ...

HELMER

Been here four months. You must miss Canada.

MCCRAE

Not as much as you I imagine. The trenches must be hell.

HELMER

It is what it is. Are we winning?

MCCRAE

I don't know.

HELMER

Are we losing?

MCCRAE

I don't know.

HELMER

Each day it's the same in the trenches.

MCCRAE

Here too ... this can't go on much longer.

HELMER

What if it goes on forever?

MCCRAE

I don't see that happening.

HELMER

Why?

MCCRAE

Eventually one side or the other will run out of soldiers. There, you're good as new.

HELMER

Thanks doc. What do I owe you? Cigarette?

[Helmer digs out a muddy and crushed cigarette box from his tunic pocket.]

MCCRAE

Here let me.

[McCrae takes out a battered gun metal cigarette case and offers Helmer a cigarette. Then he takes out a match strikes it and lits Helmer's cigarette.]

HELMER

You aren't having one?

MCCRAE

I have asthma. I don't smoke.

[Helmer takes the cigarette out of his mouth and looks at it.]

HELMER

A pretty strong cigarette! How'd you come by a cigarette case?

MCCRAE

It belonged to a German airman they brought in.

HELMER

Oh.

MCCRAE

He didn't make it. He died on the operating table. The tobacco is Turkish.

[Helmer is about to throw away the cigarette.]

MCCRAE

The tobacco is Turkish.

HELMER

Turkish eh.

[He decides not to throw it away but takes another puff then looks at the cigarette.]

HELMER

We live in interesting times.

MCCRAE

Indeed we do.

[The medic reappears.]

MEDIC

The divisional courier is here to pick up the daily report.

MCCRAE

I haven't had the time to write it up.

MEDIC

I know.

MCCRAE

Write something up for me. I will sign it.

[The medic is about to turn and re-enter the tent when McCrae interjects.]

MCCRAE

How many today?

MEDIC

Over three hundred ...

MCCRAE

Is the mail bag still here?

MEDIC

Yes.

MCCRAE

Go and fetch it.

MEDIC

Yes sir.

HELMER

Three hundred patients?

MCCRAE

Not patients ... casualties. We only do front line surgery here.
Those that survive get shipped to a hospital.

HELMER

And those that don't?

[McCrae motions with his thumb to behind the tent.]

MCCRAE

There is cemetery behind the aid station ... we will have to move
soon.

HELMER

Why?

MCCRAE

We are running out of room to bury the dead.

[The medic reappears with the mail bag.]

MEDIC

Here's the mail bag sir.

[The medic wants to hand the mailbag to McCrae. He waves with his hand.]

MCCRAE

Look in the bag and see if there are any letters addressed to an Alexis Helmer.

HELMER

Oh, thank you sir. How did you come by the mail?

MCCRAE

The afternoon motorcycle courier was brought in suffering from shrapnel wounds. The German gunners are making a game of it trying to hit the afternoon courier.

[Helmer chuckles.]

HELMER

I bet they are getting pretty good.

[The Medic searches for and finds a letter for HELMER.]

MEDIC

Here you go.

[He hands HELMER a letter.]

HELMER

Thanks.

MEDIC

Oh, I forgot, doc the patient that was brought in on the stretcher is ready.

MCCRAE

Fine ... duty calls.

[The medic re-enters the tent. McCrae stands and is about to enter the tent.]

HELMER

Good luck.

[McCrae takes the cigarette case out of his pocket and tosses it to
HELMER.]

MCCRAE

Here.

HELMER

Thanks doc ... you're so kind. Most of the officers in the
trenches are mean bastards.

MCCRAE

They are mean bastards because they are just trying to keep you
alive.

HELMER

Or stay alive themselves ... but there's not a mean bone in your
body

MCCRAE

I have seen too much death and suffering to be mean.

HELMER

It must be very tough back here.

[MCCRAE nods.]

MCCRAE

I will come and tell you how things go.

HELMER

How long will things take?

MCCRAE

I just need to stop some of the bleeding and patch him up. Maybe fifteen minutes. They will move him by ambulance to the hospital up the road in the morning ... if he survives until morning.

HELMER

You must be a miracle worker.

MCCRAE

I wish I were. I'll step out and tell you how things are when we are finished.

[Helmer holds up the cigarette case.]

HELMER

Thanks doc.

MCCRAE

Try to find a quiet place and get some shut-eye. You're back to the front in the morning.

[Helmer holds up the letter.]

HELMER

I will read my letter from home first.

[MCCRAE re-enters the tent. Helmer looks up.]

HELMER

The stars are out tonight.

[HELMER is alone and opens his letter and starts to read it. He has to lean forward and read it in the diffuse light that comes from the tent.]

[end of scene.]

[Fade out]

Scene Three Operating Theatre Tent NIGHT

[There is the flash and thunder of artillery in the distance.]

[Operating theatre in tent. The scene could be one-half of the stage with the outside from the previous scene as the other half.]

[The operating theatre floor is covered with blood. There are buckets with blood stained bandages. An detached arm is sticking out of one of them. McCrae knocks over the bucket with the detached arm.]

MCCRAE

Can someone please get rid of that arm and bury it?

[The medic comes and collects the arm and bucket and exits holding both at arm's length.]

{McCrae is hard at work on the young soldier who was brought in. The young soldier is face down on the operating table.}

[There are two nurses working beside McCrae.]

[Using tweezers McCrae picks up a piece of metal from within the soldier's body and drops it into an aluminum pan with a dull ping.]

MCCRAE

Irrigate.

[A nurse irrigates the wound.]

MCCRAE

Suction.

[A nurse clears the wound of water.]

MCCRAE

It looks like we have stopped the bleeding. How is his blood pressure.

[One nurse checks.]

NURSE

Low ... his pulse is stable.

[McCrae opens the wound a bit and pokes around.]

MCCRAE

Damn.

NURSE

What's wrong doctor?

MCCRAE

His spinal cord is severed just above his pelvis.

NURSE

Poor boy ... at least he will live.

MCCRAE

Not much of a life, now that he has lost the use of his legs.

NURSE

It could have been much worst.

MCCRAE

Can you close? Make sure you get all the gauze and sponges out of him. I don't want a case of peritonitis.

NURSE

Yes doctor. You should get some rest. It will be dawn in a few hours.

[McCrae removes his gloves his hat and gown and throws them into a bucket.]

MCCRAE

So it will ... and you know what that means ...

[McCrae steps out of the tent and see that Helmer is still waiting.]

MCCRAE

You still here?

HELMER

What's the news?

MCCRAE

Like I said he will live ...

HELMER

But?

MCCRAE

He will never walk again. His spinal cord is all shot up.

HELMER

What!

MCCRAE

Its severed just above his pelvis. He won't feel anything from the waist down.

HELMER

Well doc .. at least he is alive.

MCCRAE

Yes ... at least.

HELMER

Are you ok doc?

MCCRAE

I am just tired. I see too much of this.

HELMER

I imagine you do.

[McCrae notices that Helmer is holding tightly onto his letter. He sits down on a wooden box.]

MCCRAE

What's the news from home?

HELMER

Good news ... I am a father!

MCCRAE

Congratulations, boy or girl.

HELMER

Boy ... born five weeks ago.

MCCRAE

Let me buy you a drink.

[MCCRAE produces a metal flask from his tunic, opens it and hands it to Helmer. Helmer takes a swig and hands it back. McCrae takes a swig and offers it to Helmer a second time.]

HELMER

No thanks doc...

[he chortles.]

HELMER

I never touch the stuff.

MCCRAE

I won't tell anyone ... if you don't.

[He offers it to Helmer a second time and Helmer takes a second and longer swig.]

HELMER

You have any kids sir?

MCCRAE

Not that I know of.

HELMER

You married doc?

MCCRAE

No ... but I was once engaged.

HELMER

May I ask what happened?

MCCRAE

She died unexpectedly.

HELMER

I am sorry to hear that.

MCCRAE

That's ok. It was a long time ago. Two wars ago in fact.

HELMER

Two?

MCCRAE

This one and the Boer war.

HELMER

You fought in the Boer war?

MCCRAE

Yup.

HELMER

Doctor?

MCCRAE

Nope ... artillery.

HELMER

Arty huh ...

MCCRAE

Surprised?

HELMER

Nothing surprises me anymore. I have seen and endured too much.

MCCRAE

I bet you have. I understand the trenches are hell.

HELMER

Only half the time.

MCCRAE

When is that?

HELMER

When I am awake. You know doc you're still young. You should get married.

MCCRAE

I don't expect to survive this war and even if by chance I did who would want to marry a broken soul ...

HELMER

Huh?

[MCCRAE stands suddenly.]

MCCRAE

You know I need some help around here. What say I get you reassigned here behind the line ... you being married man and a father and all.

HELMER

That would be nice ... but I don't think Divison will let you do that.

MCCRAE

It's safer back here at the aid station.

HELMER

I know doc .. and if it was left to you and I .. I would accept your kind offer pronto, but

MCCRAE

But what?

HELMER

... my sergeant has just promoted me to corporal. Besides, I am expected back in the morning.

MCCRAE

Well, at the very least you should grab something to eat and some shut eye.

HELMER

Fair enough ...

MCCRAE

I will walk you over to the mess tent.

[Helmer stands and picks up his rifle. }

HELMER

lead the way doc.

[MCCRAE leads the way off stage of Helmer follows.]

[Fade out]

[End of Scene]

ACT Two

Scene One Canadian Trench May 1915 DAY

[It is early morning in a Canadian trench. The Sergeant is walking down the line rousing the troops.]

SERGEANT

Stand to ... Stand to boys ... you'll have plenty of time to sleep
when you're dead.

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

What's up Sarge?

SERGEANT

HQ tells us to expect another attack this morning.

SECOND YOUNG SOLDIER

Like every morning eh Sarger?

SERGEANT

This morn' it's going to be different.

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

How so Sarge?

SERGEANT

Spotters have seen a green cloud approaching us from the east.

[The soldiers get very agitated.]

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

The Huns are gassing us!

SECOND YOUNG SOLDIER

We're all going to die.

SERGEANT

No one's going to die son ...

SECOND YOUNG SOLDIER

We're all going to die.

SERGEANT

keep your heads, lads. We'll get through this morning.

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

Shouldn't we do something Sarge?

SERGEANT

Yes stand to and stay out of the bottom of the trench. Chlorine is heavier than air. It will gather at the bottom of the trench.

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

Bloody Huns!

[Helmer reappears.]

SERGEANT

You're back early. We weren't expecting you until midday.

HELMER

Did you miss me Sarge?

SERGEANT

Hadn't noticed you were gone in fact.

HELMER

What's all the fuss?

SECOND YOUNG SOLDIER

We're all going to die.

HELMER

We are in the middle of a war ... death is all around us.

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

The Huns are gassing us.

HELMER

Is that all!

[The Sergeant turns to Helmer and addresses him.]

SERGEANT

Third time this month. You up to this corporal?

HELMER

I am ready for them as I will ever be.

SERGEANT

Good man. Stand to lads. Get ready with your masks.

[The Sergeant carries on down the line. Helmer turns to the other soldiers as he dons his mask.

HELMER

We'll get through this.

SECOND YOUNG SOLDIER

How can you be so sure?

HELMER

Been through this before. The Huns will not advance when there is gas lurking about.

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

So they expect the gas will break us ...

HELMER

Yup ... first they unleash the gas on us,

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

Corporal ... then what?

HELMER

then they unleash the shelling,

SECOND YOUNG SOLDIER

And then what?

HELMER

then the push ... but we're hardy Canucks ... we'll stand our ground.

[The second young soldier fully dons his mask.]

HELMER

Wait for it ... the sergeant will tell us when its time to mask up.

[HELMER Stands to on the opposite side of the trench.]

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

What's you doing corporal?

HELMER

Don't they teach you newbies anything?

SECOND YOUNG SOLDIER

Nope ...

HELMER

The gas will creep down the front side of the trench then fill the bottom. If you stay back on the other side of the trench the gas won't affect you much.

[The Sergeant reappears.]

SERGEANT

Corporal, you are the anchor here.

HELMER

Yes Sergeant.

SERGEANT

No one moves without orders.

[The Sergeant continues on down the line.]

[Helmer sets a round in his rifle.]

HELMER

You bug out and they will shoot you for desertion.

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

They wouldn't!

SECOND YOUNG SOLDIER

I heard they shot a man in B-company for desertion last Monday.

FIRST YOUNG SOLDIER

Where you hear that?

HELMER

It's just a rumor.

[There is a shrill whistle in the background.]

HELMER

Here we go ... on masks ...

[They don their masks. The second soldier is so nervous he can't do this properly and so the first soldier helps him.]

HELMER

keep your heads.

SECOND YOUNG SOLDIER

We're all going to die.

HELMER

No one's going to die ...

[There is a shrill sound of artillery passing in both directions overhead.]

[A dry ice vapour begins to creep into the trench.]

HELMER

... here we go lads

[Shells begin to explode around them

[End of Scene]

Scene Two Medical Aid Station behind Canadian Lines DAY

[There is the thunder of artillery in the distance.]

[Many walking wounded mill about coughing and groaning. They are victims of the gas attack. They have bandages covering their eyes and stand with one hand extended onto the shoulder of the person in front of them.]

[A man is brought up on a stretcher. It is Helmer. He is bloody and covered in bandages. The medic rushes into the tent.]

[In a moment the tent flap opens. The stretcher with Helmer is brought quickly in.]

[There is a few second delay and the stretcher is brought out with Helmer still on it.]

MEDIC

I guess we weren't quick enough.

[The tent flap opens. It is McCrae in his operating room garb. He lowers the masks, speaks and points.]

MCCRAE

Set his body down over there.

MEDIC

Yes sir.

MCCRAE

Poor bastard. He should have stayed here when he had the chance...

MEDIC

Come again sir?

[McCrae reacts with a start. He had not expected anyone to over hear what he had said.]

MCCRAE

I offered him a posting here at the hospital. He should have stayed here.

MEDIC

It's too late now sir ...

[McCrae is visibly upset.]

MCCRAE

Don't be so god damn insubordinate ...

MEDIC

Sorry sir.

MCCRAE

No, son it is I who is sorry.

MEDIC

Trying day ...

MCCRAE

Yes ...

MEDIC

Do you think the Huns will break through our lines?

MCCRAE

No, son I don't think they will.

MEDIC

Then I wish they would stop trying.

MCCRAE

I don't think they will, the bastards.

MEDIC

The Padre thinks this is hell arrived on earth.

MCCRAE

The Padre might be right. Go and tell him I want this man buried with full Christian honours.

[The flap of the tent opens and a voice calls out.]

NURSE

We need you doctor.

MCCRAE

Tell the Padre. I will attend to his funeral.

MEDIC

Sir.

[McCrae steps back into the tent.]

MEDIC

I have never seen him so upset. I guess the doc knew him ...

[They move the stretcher to one side, then dash off to gather more wounded.]

[More walking wounded arrive.]

[End of Scene]

Scene Three Padre's Tent NIGHT

[The Padre sits at a makeshift desk made of packing crates. There is a cross and a candle on the table. The padre sits with his back to the audience. He is writing a letter.]

[The tent flap open and MCCRAE's head pokes in.]

MACCRAE

Good evening Padre.

PADRE

McCrae I heard you wanted to see me. Come in.

MCCRAE

You are up late.

[The Padre takes a pocket watch out, flips it open and then snaps it shut.]

PADRE

It's early in fact ... a quarter past four. Dawn will be here soon.

MCCRAE

Then you are up early.

PADRE

Haven't laid my head down yet. There is too much to do.

MCCRAE

Yes ... I haven't been to bed either. Am I interrupting what you are doing.

PADRE

No ... come in and sit. I need a break. I am writing letters of condolence to the families of the dead soldiers.

[The Padre motions MCCRAE in and towards a folding wooden chair. MCCRAE sits. McCrae is in his uniform.

MCCRAE

It must be an never ending task ...

PADRE

I hope it does end ... and soon. The best of our generation is dying there in the mud of Flanders.

MCCRAE

You have described it as hell on earth ...

PADRE

Yes ... hell on earth.

[MCCRAE bows his head and looks at his hands.]

PADRE

Yes ... hell on earth. What's on your mind doctor?

[McCrae pauses before answering.]

MCCRAE

I don't think I can do this anymore.

PADRE

We each have a job to do in this war.

MCCRAE

I have seen too much suffering.

PADRE

I imagine you have. We all have, but we must keep the faith my son.

MCCRAE

It is not a question of faith Padres.

PADRE

What is it a question about?

MCCRAE

It is a question of me sawing another arm off a young man, or his leg.
I can't do this anymore. Now I am to watch men drown in their own
fluids, gassed and killed in the most excruciating fashion.

PADRE

McCrae you are the best surgeon in the Canadian Army, probably the
best on the Western Front and the only hope many of these young

Canadian boys have when they are brought in here to be saved and mended.

[The Padre stands and walks over to side table and a bottle with two glasses. He pours one glass of sherry and walks back, offering one glass to McCrae.]

PADRE

It will help you sleep.

[McCrae accepts a glass.]

MCCRAE

Thank you.

[McCrae looks and sees the Padre has not poured a drink for himself.]

MCCRAE

Aren't you having one?

PADRE

No ... I am a tea tottler myself. The sherry is for my guests.

[McCrae shrugs his shoulders and downs the sherry in one pull. He hands the Padre the empty glass.]

MCCRAE

Will this hell ever end?

PADRE

God willing it will. Until it does you need to do your job.

MCCRAE

I can't do this anymore.

[The Padre walks over and pours a second sherry and offers it to McCrae. He accepts the glass but does not drink it. He holds the glass and stares at it as if in a daze. Then he downs the glass in a ferocious gulp. He hands the glass back to the Padre.]

PADRE

My job is to mend broken souls ... yours is to mend broken bodies.
We cannot give up you and I.

[MCCRAE begins to cry into his hands.]

[The Padre lifts a letter off his desk.]

PADRE

It's this young man Helmer isn't it.

[McCrae looks up and the Padre hands him the letter. McCrae glances at the letter without reading it and hands it back to the Padre.]

MCCRAE

Yes.

PADRE

You knew him didn't you?

MCCRAE

Yes ...

PADRE

For very long?

[McCrae shakes his head.]

PADRE

I read the letter in his pocket.

MCCRAE

So you know he had just found out he was a father.

PADRE

Yes.

MCCRAE

I tried to get him to not go back.

PADRE

That was his choice ... not yours.

MCCRAE

Why did he go back?

PADRE

Because it was the right thing to do. He wasn't thinking about himself.

MCCRAE

What was he thinking about?

PADRE

Isn't it obvious?

MCCRAE

Not to me it is.

PADRE

That's because the reason comes from his soul and not his body.

MCCRAE

But he is dead, his life has ended.

PADRE

But his soul lives on. It does in his wife and his son. He went back for them. For their peace and security. For their future.

[The Padre walks over to McCrae and puts his hand on his shoulder.]

PADRE

And for yours and mine as well.

[MCCRAE looks up at the PADRE. The PADRE looks down at McCrae and softens his voice.]\

PADRE

I understand you use to write poetry.

[MCCRAE nods and as he nods he lowers his head.]

MCCRAE

Yes I did once ... But that seems a lifetime ago.

PADRE

You were published weren't you?

MCCRAE

Yes I was.

PADRE

You writing poetry now?

[MCCRAE shakes his head.]

MCCRAE

I can't seem to.

PADRE

Write something so that your friend will be remembered.

[McCrae bows his head and stares at his hands. His hands are shaking.]

[The PADRE puts his hand on MCCRAE shoulder and gives it a firm squeeze.]

PADRE

What was it the poet Rudyard Kipling say? When you can keep your head ...

MCCRAE

While all those around you are losing there's

PADRE

You are a man. You'll be fine John.

[The Padre walks over to his desk to pick up his hat. He pats back his hair and puts his hat on.]

PADRE

It should be light enough to see.

MCCRAE

See what?

PADRE

To not fall into a grave. Come let us go bury your friend and say a few words for him, you and I. I shall write his widow a letter of condolence ...

MCCRAE

It's the middle of the night.

PADRE

It's the middle of the morning.

[MCCRAE stands. The padre opens the tent flap and McCrae walks to the flap and stops.]

MCCRAE

It is quiet.

PADRE

Yes ... the guns have dined. God will be listening.

[The two men leave the tent together.]

[End of Scene]

ACT Three

Scene One Canadian Military Cemetery Ypres DAWN

[McCrae is sitting on the ground, writing on a piece of paper, looking melancholically at a new dug grave. It is the dawn. He has not slept.]

[There is the sound of artillery in the back ground. There is also the sound of birds bidding the dawn.]

[The medic and nurse approach him.]

MEDIC

There you are Captain. We have been looking all over for you. There are many wounded waiting to be attended.

[MCCRAE slowly looks up at them. He reluctantly stands, crumbles the paper and throws it to the ground. He walks past them without saying a sound.]

[The Medic picks up the paper uncrumples it.]

NURSE

What is it?

MEDIC

Nothing of importance!

[The MEDIC throws it back onto the ground.

[The MEDIC marches off after MCCRAE.]

[The NURSE stays behind for a moment. The NURSE kneels and uncrumples the paper and stands.]

[The NURSE begins to read the poem to herself and stops and wipes a tear from her eye.]

[The NURSE walks over to the grave, and sits down besides it.]

[The NURSE admires the poppies which are blowing in the wind for a moment.

[The NURSE begins to read the poem.]

NURSE

In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders Fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from falling hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders Fields.

[The NURSE folds the poem up and hides it away near to her heart.]

[The NURSE carefully picks a poppy from the ground and puts it into her dress.]

[The NURSE stands with a distant and vacant look in her eyes.]

[The NURSE is crying.]

[The NURSE walks down the scene and down off the stage and walks down the corridor of the playhouse and out.]

[There is the sound of birds chirping. bidding the dawn. The guns are silent.]

[Play the song, *Maple Leaf for Ever.*]

[FADE TO BLACK]

[End]

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